

It is Christ Himself Who Comforts His Brethren Through Joseph

Genesis 50:15-21, Quinquagesima Sunday
February 22, 2009

Beloved of the Lord.....Do believers speak in the stead and in the place of God? When you have a brother, a fellow Christian who has fallen into a dreadful sin, and you can hear by their own words they are truly grieved in their heart, do you as a believer have the right to say: In the name of Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins! In other words, can we speak in the place of God? Can we forgive the sins of others in the stead and in the place and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? Here each believer answers YES, even YES INDEED I CAN, for God has given to His Church the office and power of the keys. By the same token it is also true that if we are dealing with an impenitent sinner, that is any person who by their words and deeds stubbornly denies or defends their sin we must say to them that God does not forgive their sins and as long as they do not repent heaven is closed.

This is indeed the clear and undeniable teaching of the Scriptures, for Jesus said to His disciples, the Church, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." We the believers, open and close the doors to heaven by forgiving or not forgiving the sins of others in the stead, in the place, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has given this power to the Church, to all believers, BUT not to any Synod, not to any Pope, not to just a few ordained pastors, but to all believers. "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood." What a honor and distinct privilege it is then dear believer, to comfort your penitent brother with the joyous words of Christ, "Thy sins be forgiven thee, go in peace." This is exactly what Joseph did in our lesson today for his own brothers. Joseph spoke in the stead, and in the place, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Christ spoke through Joseph, so Christ speaks through us when we forgive the sins of the penitent and retain the sins of the impenitent.

I. Those who refuse to repent die in their sins. When we consider Joseph and his brethren, we must understand the many years Joseph suffered because of their sin. At the tender age of 17, out of hatred and spite, Joseph's own brothers sold him as a slave. Their sin, their hatred, their anger, and their jealousy caused Joseph to be removed and separated from everything he loved: his home, his father, and his little brother Benjamin. Because Joseph was both a sinner we can safely assume there must have been a struggle in his heart to forgive his brethren. Day after day, year after year he must have also struggled in his heart to understand why the Lord had allowed this evil to befall him, for Joseph was a slave from the age of

17 to 30.....thirteen years. Even when he was exalted to ruler, there were yet seven years of plenty, and two years of famine by the time his brothers were reconciled with him. What is remarkable to understand is that for these 22 years, Joseph by faith did not hold a grudge and during this whole time there was always forgiveness in his heart toward his brethren. Joseph knew he was not their judge for he later said, "Fear not: for am I in the place of God?" God alone knows the heart and God alone is the judge. Jesus said, "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven."

During those 22 years of estrangement, Joseph did not know whether or not his brothers had repented. That is why the first time they came and bowed before him, Joseph "made himself strange unto them, and spake roughly unto them." He didn't speak roughly because he was bitter, but since he had direct knowledge of their sin, he had to determine if they were sorry. This was a preaching of the law. In like manner we at times must speak roughly with sinners of the world. The preaching of the law comes before the preaching of the Gospel.

As Joseph made himself strange to the brethren and spoke roughly with them, so God at times hides His gracious face from us. In Isaiah 54:7-8 our Lord says, "For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer." You might say that for our own good, for a moment God covers His smiling face with a frowning mask, and we perceive God is angry with our sin. Suddenly in life we find ourselves suffering from poverty or illness, hardness of life, sickness or disease, loneliness or heart, or an evil government. But when the moment is over, God removes His mask and once again we see His face is still shining upon us and is gracious unto us. "With everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer." I will never leave thee nor forsake thee, our God says. You see it is due to our cold and callous human nature that God at times must through affliction multiply our sins, but it is only so He can then multiply His grace. To the harlot Jesus said, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."

Now here let us consider our own sins. Are they many or few? In our lesson of Joseph and the brethren, who do we identify with? When we look into the mirror of God's law we see we are not Joseph the innocent victim, rather we are the guilty brothers worthy of execution by the lord Joseph. God knows well we have not been good brothers or sisters in life, nor have we been kind to all brothers, tenderhearted and forgiving. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves, nor have we shown mercy and compassion to our enemies. Indeed we

find the evidence of our wicked nature every day in our heart, when we remember past sins others have committed against us, and we are again and again tempted to hold a grudge and not forgive.

"Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door." Woe to the man who assumes the Judgment seat of Christ and says, "I'm not going to forgive you.....I'm still angry at you!" Woe to that man who refuses to forgive the troubled and penitent sinner! Would Joseph be in heaven today if he had not forgiven his brothers their trespasses against him? Can those who are not sorry for their sins inherit eternal life? Indeed they cannot. This is why believers must retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent. For those who refuse to repent of their sins, die in their sins. To the stubborn Jews who refused to repent Jesus said, "I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go, ye cannot come." Jn 8

II. Christ comforts His brethren through Joseph, each believer. Oh how thankful we can be in our heart, that the Lord through the law has revealed our sins! But God reveals sins only so He can reveal our Savior from all sin, Jesus Christ the Lord. When we are sorry in our heart for all the sins we have committed against the brethren, who is it that we are bowing down to? Truly we are bowing down in faith to our own Brother, Jesus Christ the Lord. Since Jesus is the Son of Man, Jesus is also our Brother, but He is our Eternal Brother in that He is our eternal God, who from eternity chose and elected us for salvation, by and with the payment of His own holy and precious blood shed for the sins of all men upon the cross. This is why our eternal Brother says to us from His throne of Judgment, "Fear not, I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee." In our lesson when we see Joseph speak words of kindness and words of mercy from His throne, it is Christ Himself who speaks through Joseph, comforting the brethren. Joseph said, "Fear ye not, I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them." This dear brethren, is what our Lord Jesus does for us every Sunday when we come to church and hear His Gospel Word. Through His Means of Grace, our Eternal Brother, the Lord Jesus does the same thing, namely He absolves us of all sins and declares us righteous through His blood so that we appear as white and innocent as the snow we see outside this morning. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

We then as brethren of the Lord have the same duty, honor, and privelage as Joseph had toward His brethren. We are to comfort one another with God's grace and mercy and forgiveness. Whether we privately absolve

the troubled sinner or a pastor publicly absolves the entire congregation saying, "I forgive thee all your sins in the name of.....", we are merely speaking in the place of Christ. We are doing exactly what the apostle Paul and the Corinthians did for one penitent sinner in 2 Corinthians 2:10. Paul said, "To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST." You dear believer, and I your minister, speak together "in the person of Christ", we stand together in His stead when we forgive the sins of the penitent. Indeed the only time we cannot absolve and forgive, is if the person is not sorry and refuses to repent. Therefore husbands, if your wife by her words or deeds shows you she is sorry for what she said to you, tell her what she needs to hear, that Jesus has forgiven her of all these sins. Wives, if your husband feels bad that he has been angry in his heart against you, tell him what he needs to hear, that Jesus is the peace of our heart. Children, if your sister or brother apologizes to you and they feel bad that they fought with you, tell them they are forgiven and that Jesus happily holds each little lamb in His arms. Truly what a joy it is for us as brethren to comfort one another with God's grace. What a joy and privelage it is to say, "Thy sins be forgiven thee, go in peace."

Therefore brethren, "Comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men." "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." It is in the knowledge that Christ has forgiven us, we find the strength to forgive the brethren. While we must indeed at times speak roughly with sinners, let us remember the law is only our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ. When there is sorrow, the preaching of the law ends, and the comfort of the Gospel begins. And finally let us never forget that when we confess our sins to one another, and a brother absolves us of our sins, it is really Christ who has just spoken. Let us now listen carefully and hear Christ speak to own heart through the mouth of a brother. "Dear brother, thy sins be forgiven thee, go in peace." "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort! Amen.

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